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Canada. Family Violence Prevention  
Division.

Child abuse and neglect







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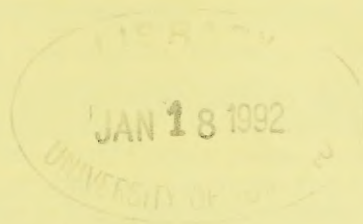


Health and Welfare  
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# The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence



## Child Abuse and Neglect

### What is Child Abuse?

Child abuse refers to the mistreatment or neglect of a child by a parent, guardian or care giver which results in injury or significant emotional or psychological harm to a child.

Child abuse is expressed in several different forms:

**Physical Abuse** is the deliberate application of force to any part of a child's body which results in, or may possibly result in, a non-accidental injury. It may involve a single incident or a pattern or series of incidents. Child physical abuse is unique among the various aspects of family violence because it is often connected to or confused with punishment.

**Child Sexual Abuse** occurs when a child is used for the sexual gratification of an adult or adolescent. It involves the exposure of a child to sexual contact, activity or behaviour, and may include invitation to sexual touching, intercourse or other forms of exploitation, such as juvenile prostitution or pornography. Aside from this definition child sexual abuse is not addressed in the context of this fact sheet. A separate fact sheet addressed exclusively to the subject of child sexual abuse is available from the National Clearinghouse On Family Violence.

**Neglect** describes acts of omission which significantly impede a child's emotional, psychological, or physical

development. Physical neglect consists of the failure to adequately meet a child's needs for nutrition, clothing, accommodation, medical care and protection from harm. Emotional neglect is defined as the failure to satisfy the developmental needs of a child to feel loved, wanted, secure and worthy. It ranges from passive indifference to outright rejection.

**Emotional Abuse** involves persistent attacks on a child's sense of self. Emotionally abusive behaviour is usually chronic, and is often part of a pattern of dysfunctional child rearing. Habitual humiliation, rejection or the constant reiteration that a child is stupid or bad can actively undermine a child's sense of worth and self confidence. Other emotionally abusive acts include, forced isolation, intimidation, exploitation, terrorizing or routinely making unreasonable demands on a child.

### How Widespread is the Problem?

The true prevalence of child abuse is difficult to assess, as only the most extreme cases tend to come to the attention of the professional community. Also, the failure to recognize child abuse, and in some instances the failure to acknowledge its reality, leads to non-reporting.

The nature of the problem, its secrecy and shame, the legal sanctions which it can entail, and the young age and relative dependency of its victims all serve to



reduce voluntary reporting. Furthermore, while the number of child abuse cases handled by social agencies can be calculated, the actual incidence of undiscovered and unreported abuse can only be estimated.

There are no national statistics for child abuse in Canada. Each province and territory compiles its own figures, according to its own definitions. In some provinces, suspected cases are combined with confirmed ones, emotional abuse is not distinguished from physical abuse, etc.

- A national family violence survey done in the United States revealed that nearly 1.5 million children are very severely abused each year.<sup>1</sup> The American study distinguished very severe violence (kicking, burning, scalding, threatening or attacking with a knife or gun) from severe violence, which it defined as "hitting a child with an object". When this latter measure was added it estimated that 6.9 million children are physically abused each year.<sup>2</sup>
- In Ontario, the Children's Aid Society statistics for 1983 indicate that there were 3,546 child physical abuse investigations, for 1984 there were 4,340, and 5,824 by 1986.<sup>3</sup>
- A report by Saskatchewan Social Services noted that underfeeding, or caloric deprivation, causes over 50% of the cases of "failure to thrive" in infants. That figure does not include failure to thrive due to organic causes or a feeding error on the parents' part.<sup>4</sup>
- More pervasive and less easily detected than physical abuse is child neglect. A Nova Scotian Task Force on Family and Children's Services found that 70% of the children on child welfare caseloads had or were suffering from neglect.<sup>5</sup>

## **Facts to Consider**

### *The Victim*

- Child abuse is not confined to any one group or social class; it cuts across all ethnic, religious, social and economic backgrounds. Although, it is usually those families of lower socio-economic status who come to the attention of the public authorities.<sup>6</sup>
- Potentially the most serious cases of child abuse involve preschoolers or infants.<sup>7</sup> Infants, in abusive homes, are particularly at risk as they are totally dependent, vulnerable, non-verbal and require a considerable amount of parental attention and patience.

- Children generally want to tell about their abuse so it can be stopped, but they are often afraid that they will not be believed or protected, or are fearful of the possible consequences of disclosure.
- The effects of child abuse are far reaching and profound; it appears that it can have very serious social consequences including, but not limited to, delinquency, criminality, mental illness, developmental delays and teenage pregnancy.<sup>8</sup>
- Victims of child abuse are at considerable risk of suffering from language delays, learning disabilities, mental illness and brain damage. Similarly, children who are brought up in an abusive home are more likely to sustain undernutrition or suffer growth delays.<sup>9</sup>
- "Failure to thrive" in infants is sometimes the result of neglect, leading in extreme cases, to development delays and even death.
- While physical assault cases are more likely to come to the attention of the public authorities, neglect can represent an equally serious risk to a child; moreover, the incidence of neglect is higher than that of physical abuse.<sup>10</sup>
- Child abuse has received considerable public attention in recent years, neglect has not. Any significant effort to alleviate child neglect would have to address the need for adequate income, affordable daycare, accessible family support services, employment programs and other resources that are requisite for a positive family milieu.
- A study done in Toronto with adolescent runaways found that nearly 75% of them had been physically beaten as children.<sup>11</sup>

- Victims of childhood abuse are at a greater risk of becoming abusers themselves. A recent study done for Correctional Services Canada found that 75% of abusive husbands came from violent abusive families.<sup>12</sup>

- A study done with male adolescent prostitutes found that 72% of them had been subjected to physical or emotional abuse by family members.<sup>13</sup>

### *The Abuser*

- Case histories of abusive parents frequently reveal that as children, they were made to feel unloved, unwanted, unappreciated and unworthy. Their low self-worth often stems from a self-fulfilling prophecy initiated by their parents: told they were "no good",



maltreating parents tend to believe this and continue to do things which support that perception.

- Abusive parents are often afraid or emotionally unable to ask for help from outside support systems, even when the resources are available.
- The vast majority of abusive parents have themselves been abused as children, however not all victims of abuse go on to assault children. Previous victimization is not the cause of child abuse, rather it is a significant contributing factor.
- All ages, economic groups and social classes are represented in the backgrounds of abusers. However, a number of researchers have demonstrated that, given the same injury or condition, children from low income homes are much more likely to be reported as being abused than children from middle or upper income families.<sup>15</sup> As a result it is not surprising that abusers from low-income families are disproportionately represented in official reporting data.
- Many abusers view themselves as victims. They feel that they have lost control of their children and their own lives. When confronted with what they perceive to be disrespectful behaviour from their children they lash out in an effort to establish control.<sup>16</sup>
- Child-abusing parents frequently have unrealistic expectations about their children's, including their infant's, developmental ability. They often demand a level of physical, social and emotional maturity which is inappropriate given the age of their children.

### Reporting Child Abuse

Child abuse is sometimes mistakenly thought to be a private family matter. It is not. If you have reasonable grounds to suspect that a child is being abused or neglected, promptly report your concerns to the child welfare agency, provincial/territorial social services department or police force in your community.

Reporting is neither difficult nor time-consuming. In all cases, the person reporting is protected from any kind of legal action provided the report is not made out of malice. If necessary, a report can be made anonymously.

### Where to go for Support Services

Contact your local:

- child welfare agency
- police department
- social service agency

- hospital
- mental health centre
- distress centre
- or other community service organizations that provide counselling and support to children and families.

### What can be done to Prevent Child Abuse?

- Most abusive parents do not consciously set out to harm their children. Therefore, if efforts to assist troubled families are enhanced, parents at risk of abusing may be reached and helped before they resort to violence.
- Encourage your local school board to develop and implement child abuse prevention programs. Abused children tend to repeat the pattern of abuse, and prevention is one of the most effective instruments in arresting the cycle of violence.
- If a child tells you about an abusive situation or experience respond in a supportive manner, showing the child that he or she is believed, and ensure that the occurrence is promptly reported to the appropriate authorities.
- You can assist by teaching children how to recognize and say no to abusive or exploitative behaviour.
- You can ensure that children and adults know where they can obtain information and assistance to prevent an abusive or neglectful situation from developing.

### Suggested Reading

- *Child Abuse: A Shared Responsibility: A Handbook for Youth and Recreation Personnel*, Linda Reid, Toronto: Ministry of Community and Social Services, 1985 (aussi disponible en français).
- *Child Abuse: Implications for Child Development and Psychopathology*, David A. Wolfe, Developmental Clinical Psychology and Psychiatry, Vol. 10, Beverley Hills: Sage Publications, 1987.
- *Child abuse and neglect law: A Canadian perspective*, Douglas J. Besharov, Washington, D.C.: Child Welfare League of America, Inc., 1985.
- *Des enfants maltraités au Québec?*, Christine Zeller and Camille Messier, Québec: Les Publications du Québec, 1987.



- *Child Abuse: Discussion Paper*, prepared by Andy Wachtel for: "Working Together: 1989 National Forum on Family Violence" 1989 (aussi disponible en français).
- *Rejected Children: A Guide for Professionals and Adults who have Frequent Contact with Young People*, Jean-Guy Myre, Québec: Comité de la protection de la jeunesse, 1986. (aussi disponible en français)
- *Protection de l'enfance: réalité de l'intervention*, Robert Dubé and Marjolaine St-Jules, Montréal: Gaétan Morin éditeur, 1987.
- *The Psychologically Battered Child*, James Garbarino, Edna Buttman and Janis Wilson Seeley, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1986.

**Audiovisual:** The Family Violence Prevention Division of Health and Welfare Canada has compiled over 50 films and videos on family violence, which can be borrowed free of charge through the regional offices of the National Film Board.

#### Endnotes

1. Murray A. Straus and Richard J. Gelles, *How Violent are American Families? Estimates from the National Family Violence Resurvey and Other Studies*, 1988, p. 26.
2. Ibid, p. 31.
3. John Meston, *Child Abuse in Canada: Implications for Child Care Policy*, Ottawa: Canadian Child Welfare Association, June 1988, p. 4.
4. Saskatchewan. Department of Social Services. Child Protection Branch, *Health Professions: Child Abuse and Neglect*, Regina: Saskatchewan Social Services, 1979, p. 4.
5. Nova Scotia. Task Force on Family and Children's Services, *Report of the Task Force on Family and Children's Services*, Halifax: Department of Social Services, 1987, p. 62.
6. Deborah Frankel-Howard, *Family Violence: A Review of Theoretical and Clinical Literature*, Ottawa: National Health and Welfare, 1989, p. 25.
7. Benjamin Schlesinger, *Child Abuse in Canada*, Toronto: University of Toronto, 1984, p. 13.
8. D. Finkelhor, G.T. Hotaling and K. Yllo, *Stopping Family Violence: Research Priorities for the Coming Decade*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1988, p. 38.
9. H.P. Martin, "Abused Children – What Happens Eventually", in *Child Abuse: A Community Concern*, Kim Oates (ed.), New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1982, pp. 156-7.
10. Isabel Wolock and Bernard Horowitz, *Child Maltreatment as a Social Problem: The Neglect of Neglect*, Ottawa: National Health and Welfare, October 1984. p. 9
11. Mark-David Janus, Arlene McCormack, Ann Wolbert Burgess, and Carol Hartman, *Adolescent Runaways: Causes and Consequences*, Toronto: D.C. Heath & Co., 1987, p. 14.
12. Barbara Appleford, *Family Violence Review: Prevention and Treatment of Abusive Behavior*, Ottawa: The Correctional Service of Canada, 1989.
13. D.K. Weisberg, *Children of the Night: A Study of Adolescent Prostitution*, Toronto: D.C. Heath and Co., 1985, p. 49.
14. Bonnie Hutchinson, *Breaking the Cycle of Family Violence*, Ottawa: The Correctional Service of Canada, 1988, p. 12.
15. Richard J. Gelles, "The Family and Its Role in the Abuse of Children", *Psychiatric Annals*, 17:4, April 1987, p. 230.
16. Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence*, New York: Viking, 1988, pp. 172-3.

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For further information and publications on child abuse or on other family violence issues, contact:

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